

The Founding Fathers

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention

The Founding Fathers: A Brief Overview

The 55 delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention were a distinguished body of men who represented a cross section of 18th-century American leadership. Almost all of them were well-educated men of means who were dominant in their communities and states, and many were also prominent in national affairs. Virtually every one had taken part in the Revolution; at least 29 had served in the Continental forces, most of them in positions of command.

Political Experience

The group, as a whole, had extensive political experience. At the time of the convention, four-fifths, or 41 individuals, were or had been members of the Continental Congress. Thomas Mifflin and Nathaniel Gorham had served as president of the body. The only ones who lacked congressional experience were Richard Bassett, John Blair, David Brearly, Jacob Broom, William R. Davie, Jonathan Dayton, Alexander Martin, Luther Martin, George Mason, James McClurg, William Paterson, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Caleb Strong, and Robert Yates. Eight men (George Clymer, Benjamin Franklin, Elbridge Gerry, Robert Morris, George Read, Roger Sherman, James Wilson, and George Wythe) had signed the Declaration of Independence. Six (Daniel Carroll, John Dickinson, Elbridge Gerry, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, and Roger Sherman) had affixed their signatures to the Articles of Confederation. But only two, Roger Sherman and Robert Morris, underwrote all three of the nation's basic documents. Practically all of the 55 delegates had experience in colonial and state government. John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, John Langdon, Robert Livingston, Alexander Martin, Edmund Randolph, George Read, and John Rutledge had been governors, and the majority had held county and local offices.

Occupations

The delegates practiced a wide range of occupations, and many men pursued more than one career simultaneously. Thirty-five were lawyers or had benefited from legal training, though not all of them relied on the profession for a livelihood. Some had also become judges.

At the time of the convention, 13 individuals were businessmen, merchants, or shippers: William Blount, Jacob Broom, George Clymer, Jonathan Dayton, Thomas Fitzsimons, Elbridge Gerry, Nicholas Gilman, Nathaniel Gorham, John Langdon, Robert Morris, William Pierce, Roger Sherman, and James Wilson. Six were major land speculators: William Blount, Jonathan Dayton, Thomas Fitzsimons, Nathaniel Gorham, Robert Morris, and James Wilson. Eleven speculated in securities on a large scale: Gunning Bedford Jr., John Blair, George Clymer, Jonathan Dayton, Thomas Fitzsimons, Benjamin Franklin, Rufus King, John Langdon, Robert Morris, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, and Roger Sherman. Twelve owned or managed slave-operated plantations or large farms: Richard Bassett, John Blair, William Blount, Pierce Butler, Daniel

Carroll, Jenifer, George Mason, Charles Pinckney, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, John Rutledge, Richard D. Spaight, and George Washington. James Madison also owned slaves. Jacob Broom and Few were small farmers.

Nine of the men received a substantial part of their income from public office: Abraham Baldwin, John Blair, David Brearly, Nicholas Gilman, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, William Livingston, James Madison, and John Rutledge. Three had retired from active economic endeavors: Benjmin Franklin, James McHenry, and Thomas Mifflin. Benjamin Franklin and Hugh Williamson were scientists, in addition to their other activities. James McClurg, James McHenry, and Hugh Williamson were physicians, and William S. Johnson was a university president. Abraham Baldwin had been a minister, and Hugh Williamson, James Madison, Oliver Ellsworth, and possibly others had studied theology but had never been ordained.

A few of the delegates were wealthy. George Washington and Robert Morris ranked among the nation's most prosperous men. Daniel Carroll, William Houston, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, and Thomas Mifflin were also extremely well-to-do. Most of the others had financial resources that ranged from good to excellent. Among those with the most straitened circumstances were Abraham Baldwin, David Brearly, Jacob Broom, William Few, James Madison, William Paterson, and Roger Sherman, though they all managed to live comfortably.

A considerable number of the men were born into leading families: John Blair, Pierce Butler, Daniel Carroll, William Houston, Jared Ingersoll, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, William S. Johnson, William Livingston, Mifflin, Gouverneur Morris, both Charles Pinckney and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Edmund Randolph, John Rutledge, George Washington, and George Wythe. Others were self-made men who had risen from humble beginnings: William Few, Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Gorham, Alexander Hamilton, and Roger Sherman.

Geographic and Educational Background

Most of the delegates were natives of the 13 colonies. Only eight were born elsewhere: four (Pierce Butler, Thomas Fitzsimons, James McHenry, and William Paterson) in Ireland, two (William R. Davie and Robert Morris) in England, one (James Wilson) in Scotland, and one (Alexander Hamilton) in the West Indies. Reflecting the mobility that has always characterized American life, many of them had moved from one state to another. Sixteen individuals had already lived or worked in more than one state or colony: Baldwin, Bassett, Bedford, Dickinson, Few, Franklin, Ingersoll, Livingston, Alexander Martin, Luther Martin, Mercer, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, George Read, Roger Sherman, and Hugh Williamson. Several others had studied or traveled abroad.

The educational background of the Founding Fathers was diverse. Some, like Benjamin Franklin, were largely self-taught and had received scant formal training. Others had obtained instruction from private tutors or at academies. About half of the individuals had attended or graduated from college in the British North American colonies or abroad. Some men held advanced and honorary degrees. For the most part, the delegates were a well-educated group.

Longevity and Family Life

For their era, the delegates to the convention (like the signers of the Declaration of Independence) were remarkably long-lived. Their average age at death was almost 67. William Samuel Johnson reached the age of 92, and Few, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Hugh Williamson, and George Wythe lived into their eighties. Fifteen or sixteen (depending on Thomas Fitzsimmon's exact age) passed away in their eighth decade, and 20 or 21 in their sixties. Eight lived into their fifties; five lived only into their forties, and two of them (Alexander Hamilton and Richard Dobbs Spaight) were killed in duels. The first to die was William Houston in 1788; the last, James Madison in 1836.

Most of the delegates married and raised children. Roger Sherman fathered the largest family, 15 children by 2 wives. At least nine (Richard Bassett, David Brearly, William Samuel Johnson, George Mason, William Paterson, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Roger Sherman, James Wilson, and George Wythe) married more than once. Four (Abraham Baldwin, Nicholas Gilman, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, and Alexander Martin) were lifelong bachelors. In terms of religious affiliation, the men mirrored the overwhelmingly Protestant character of American religious life at the time and were members of various denominations. Only two, Daniel Carroll and Thomas Fitzsimons, were Roman Catholics.

Post-Convention Careers

The delegate's subsequent careers reflected their abilities as well as the vagaries of fate. Most were successful, although seven (Fitzsimons, Gorham, Luther Martin, Mifflin, Robert Morris, Pierce, and Wilson) suffered serious financial reverses that left them in or near bankruptcy. Two, Blount and Dayton, were involved in possibly treasonous activities. Yet, as they had done before the convention, most of the group continued to render outstanding public service, particularly to the new government they had helped to create.

George Washington and James Madison became President of the United States, and Rufus King and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney were nominated as candidates for the office. Elbridge Gerry served as James Madison's Vice President. Alexander Hamilton, James McHenry, James Madison, and Edmund Randolph attained Cabinet posts. Nineteen men became U.S. senators: Baldwin, Bassett, Blount, Butler, Dayton, Ellsworth, Few, Gilman, Johnson, King, Langdon, Alexander Martin, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Morris, Paterson, Charles Pinckney, Read, Sherman, and Strong. Thirteen served in the House of Representatives: Baldwin, Carroll, Clymer, Dayton, Fitzsimons, Gerry, Gilman, Madison, Mercer, Charles Pinckney, Sherman, Spaight, and Williamson. Of these, Dayton served as Speaker. Four men (Bassett, Bedford, Brearly, and Few) served as federal judges, four more (Blair, Paterson, Rutledge, and Wilson) as Associate Justices of the Supreme Court. Rutledge and Ellsworth also held the position of Chief Justice. Seven others (Davie, Ellsworth, Gerry, King, Gouverneur Morris, Charles Pinckney, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney) were named to diplomatic missions for the nation.

Name: _____ Section: _____ Date: _____

Many delegates held important state positions, including governor (Blount, Davie, Franklin, Gerry, Langdon, Livingston, Alexander Martin, Mifflin, Paterson, Charles Pinckney, Spaight, and Strong) and legislator. And most of the delegates contributed in many ways to the cultural life of their cities, communities, and states. Not surprisingly, many of their sons and other descendants were to occupy high positions in American political and intellectual life.

Taken from the National Archives and Records Administration at:
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_founding_fathers_overview.html

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention by State

Connecticut

- Oliver Ellsworth
- William Samuel Johnson
- Roger Sherman

Delaware

- Richard Bassett
- Gunning Bedford, Jr.
- Jacob Broom
- John Dickinson
- George Read

Georgia

- Abraham Baldwin
- William Few
- William Houstoun
- William Pierce

Maryland

- Daniel Carroll
- Luther Martin
- James McHenry
- John Francis Mercer
- Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer

Massachusetts

- Elbridge Gerry
- Nathaniel Gorham
- Rufus King
- Caleb Strong

New Hampshire

- Nicholas Gilman
- John Langdon

New Jersey

- David Brearley
- Jonathan Dayton
- William Houston
- William Livingston
- William Paterson

New York

- Alexander Hamilton
- John Lansing, Jr.
- Robert Yates

North Carolina

- William Blount
- William Richardson Davie
- Alexander Martin
- Richard Dobbs Spaight
- Hugh Williamson

Pennsylvania

- George Clymer
- Thomas Fitzsimons
- Benjamin Franklin
- Jared Ingersoll
- Thomas Mifflin
- Gouverneur Morris
- Robert Morris
- James Wilson

South Carolina

- Pierce Butler
- Charles Cotesworth Pinckney
- Charles Pinckney
- John Rutledge

Virginia

- John Blair
- James Madison
- George Mason
- James McClurg
- Edmund Randolph
- George Washington
- George Wythe

Rhode Island

- ❖ Did not send delegat

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention

- 1) How many delegates attended the Constitutional Convention? _____
- 2) How many served in the military during the Revolutionary War? _____
- 3) Circle the statement best describes the political experience of the delegates prior to the Convention?
 - a) The vast majority of the delegates had extensive political experience. Many of the delegates had previously held prominent positions of power in their communities, states and on the national level.
 - b) The vast majority of the delegates had very little previous political experience. Some may have held low level positions in the towns they were from but almost none had experience on the state or national level.
- 4) How many delegates at the Constitutional Convention signed the Declaration of Independence? What were there names? _____

- 5) How many delegates had signed the Articles of Confederation? _____
- 6) How many delegates at the Constitutional Convention signed the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation and the Constitution? _____ Who were they? _____

- 7) As far as occupations are concerned, 35 of the 55 delegates were _____.
- 8) What are some other jobs held by the delegates of the Constitutional Convention? _____

- 9) How many delegates were NOT born in the 13 colonies? _____ Where were they born? _____

- 10) Below, in two to three sentences, describe the education of the delegates who attended the Constitutional Convention. _____

- 11) What was the average age of death for the delegates who attended the Convention? _____
- 12) Which delegate lived to be the oldest? _____

Delegates to the Constitutional Convention

- 13) Which delegate lived the longest? _____
- 14) How did Alexander Hamilton and Richard Dobbs Spaight die? _____
- 15) When it came to religion, most of the delegates at the Convention were _____.
- 16) How does the religion of the delegates compare with the religion of the majority of Americans at that point in time? _____
- 17) How many members of the Convention eventually became President? _____
- 18) How many members of the Convention eventually became U.S. Senators? _____
- 19) How many members of the Convention eventually served in the House of Representatives? _____
- 20) How many members of the Convention eventually served on the Supreme Court? _____
- 21) How many members of the Convention eventually became foreign diplomats? _____
- 22) Which states sent the most delegates? _____ How many? _____
- 23) Which state sent the least delegates? _____ How many? _____
- 24) What state sent no delegates? _____